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Response by Kosick to “Translation and the materialities of communication”

Rebecca Kosick\*

*School of Modern Languages, University of Bristol, UK*

\*Email: [rebecca.kosick@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:rebecca.kosick@bristol.ac.uk)

Karin Littau’s call for increased attention on materiality within translation studies situates itself against a backdrop in which questions concerned with culture and its relationship to language dominated the field. While indicating that there is not “anything wrong with making culture a key aspect of our intellectual inquiry into translation”, Littau’s argument favors a renewed focus on “the material technologies and techniques that underpin cultural practices such as reading, writing, translating, painting, counting, etc.” Her primary engagements are with “media philosophy, technology studies and book history”, but the provocation also allies itself with a number of other well-established areas of investigation in neighboring disciplines. These investigations broadly concern themselves with matter, objects, things, and form and cohere under a variety of names including new materialism, speculative realism, and new formalism (among others, -isms and not). Littau’s provocation is thus urgent on its own grounds, and in its relationship with other material investigations in fields including the humanities, philosophy, and social sciences.

My aim in responding is to extend and complicate the provocation’s claims in two directions. Looking ahead, I hope to put Littau’s exploration of translation studies’ material turn into conversation with current related concerns in literary studies. In this, I suggest that translation studies is particularly well-equipped to contribute to the development of material inquiries as they relate to language. I would also like to consider the material turn in translation

studies against, as Littau has positioned it, the cultural turn that preceded it. My claim is that, for translation, the binary differentiation of these two intellectual tides is not so clean, and productively so. In exploring the contributions that translation studies can make to this discussion, I would like to add to its studiable “materials” by insisting that the material world relevant to translation does not include just the media technologies Littau primarily focuses on, but also material language itself. This results in an extension of her argument that hopes to show that one of the ways in which the material turn *can* differentiate itself from the cultural is by questioning the assumption that language is meaning over matter.

Though Littau argues in favor of attention to matter, she tends not to read language *as* matter. For example, she characterizes an “emphasis on mind, consciousness, language, meaning, discourse, critique, etc.” as an “overly anthropocentric” cultural approach to translation studies. In her earlier article for *Translation Studies* (there with a focus more specifically on mediality than materiality) she writes that “the focus in translation studies on interlingual, and *subsequently on intercultural*, translation—as ‘translation proper’—has largely been blind to the extent to which mediality is an underlying condition of all cultural output and cultural transfer” (2011, 277, emphasis mine). My goal in pointing out this positioning of language on the side of culture and meaning rather than on the side of matter is not to contest the proposal made in both these projects. Elevating questions of mediality and materiality is something I fundamentally support, and I echo Littau’s assertion that “intra- and intermedial translation in all its configurations, from the translation between individual media to the translation between media cultures, is not ‘translation improper’” (2011, 277). Instead, my aim is to point to a unique opportunity that translation studies has to bridge the gap between studies of the cultural and the material, between language and objects.

It is now uncontested that translation takes place between two cultures, not two isolated texts or sign systems. It is nevertheless the case that translation takes place *in* the materials that constitute these non-isolated texts and sign systems, and any call for a material history or future of translation studies ought to include not just the materiality of the printing press and its agentive role in shaping translation, but also the materiality of the printed (or spoken, or scrawled) word itself. In other words, I add to Littau's "materialities of communication" the materiality *of* communication. In this way, the extension I make also intersects with ongoing concerns with form and matter in literary studies, sometimes called "new formalism", which aren't so new anymore, but hope to distinguish themselves from the old formalism of New Criticism that "closeted the text away from the world" (Dillon 1997, 47). Uncloseting the text from the world was a goal of cultural studies broadly speaking, and of translation studies as one such kind of cultural study. It's also a goal of Littau's when she argues that "technology is manifestly an agent in culture", thus pursuing a material translation studies that considers the ways in which texts and translations are not only *not* isolated from the world, but also intimately shaped by its agents, human and not. Part of her argument, then, is a call for the inclusion of the material on the terms of the cultural.

In this way, Littau shows that translation studies, and the kind of comparative media studies she's proposing, do speak to culture. That said, the essay appears at times to grant, and then bracket, the achievements of the cultural turn. For example, she writes that this approach to scholarship "has been groundbreaking for translation studies, as for the humanities more generally, because it alerted us to the agency of previously marginalized figures, such as the translator". Here, Littau concedes this accomplishment, before turning her attention toward "non-human agents". But the concession itself is brief and while it's true that translation studies has,

over the last decades, attended to the translator as a sometimes-still marginalized or “invisible” figure (Venuti 1995), the broad stakes of cultural studies’ attention to “marginalized figures” are much higher than in Littau’s account. Still, her argument does not, in fact, turn away from culture. Rather, she argues in favor of a vision of culture that includes material objects and technologies as active participants, writing that “it takes a whole planet to support, prepare and make possible speech, language, text, meaning and culture”. And one of the ways Littau’s material translation studies overlaps with cultural studies is through its interest in human activity, which remains important, despite renewed attention on the material objects and technologies that feature prominently in her essay. These things matter, she tells us, because they impact *us*, in general, and translation, in particular.

My extension of Littau’s proposal is less interested in positioning the material as a cultural agent than in it is in attending to the material of language<sup>1</sup>—and by extension the form of texts—in a way that does not collapse language into culture. This means that language is not just representative of its cultural (or historical, political, ideological, etc.) context, but, and in translation in particular, neither is it wholly apart from context. In her provocatively titled article “Context Stinks”, Rita Felski writes that:

The singular disadvantage of the “context concept” is that it inveigles us into endless reiterations of the same dichotomies: text versus context, word versus world, literature versus society and history, internalist versus externalist explanations of works of art. Literary studies seems doomed to swing between these two ends of the pendulum, with opposing sides endless and fruitlessly rehashing the same arguments. (2011, 576)

Translation studies, by virtue of looking at texts that are always in relation to others, can never pin itself wholly to one or the other of these dichotomies. And yet, even when cultural context is emphasized over the texts themselves, neither is it possible for translation to ignore the text itself. The translated text is the material container for all the relations it stages as well as matter

in itself, which always exceeds or resists being completely subsumed into its relations.

Translating “sense-for-sense” may not be translating “word-for-word” but even the freest translations happen *in* words. Translation, then, is always at the nexus of the dichotomies Felski names, and a material translation studies that might find kinship with new formalist methodologies can contribute a built-in resistance to the problematic myopia of the old.

Weaving formal considerations together with contextual and cultural ones has always been key to the practice of translation and turning toward the materiality of language in translation need not be a closeting of culture, but instead an opportunity for thinking the ways culture accrues in material. The overlap I’m proposing between material and cultural studies, then, works in the opposite direction of Littau’s. Rather than considering how matter shapes culture, I am interested in the ways cultural context both must shape, and can never fully shape, material language. This is not a cratylic vision of language in which the relationship between words and their meaning is natural, not conventional or arbitrary, but an acknowledgement that the conventions of any given language do determine how language is materially constructed and arranged and that this differs between languages. This difference is the workshop of translation. The material word may function like a container for culture, and for meaning of all kinds, but it is also always resistant to fully revealing itself in translation. And this is one way a material translation studies can raise questions about the nature of matter as resistant and/or relational.

This dichotomy intersects with philosophical explorations of material objects invested in overturning a preference for “networks, negotiations, relations, interactions, and dynamic fluctuations” in favor of a “deeply *non-relational* conception of the reality of things” (Harman 2012, 187; emphasis original). Writing about object-oriented philosophy’s potential contributions to literary studies, Graham Harman argues that “instead of dissolving a text upward into its

readings or downward into its cultural elements, we should focus specifically on how it resists such dissolution” (2012, 200). This is not the conception of objects proposed by Littau, whose interest in things prioritizes their role as catalysts for changes to translation as it’s been practiced and will be practiced. As such, Littau’s interest in material objects is an interest in relations, but rather than attributing relation solely to the anthropocene, she includes matter. For her, the codex, print, and film can all be studied as agents affecting translation’s production and products.

Object-oriented philosophy, too, considers the ways “objects distort one another even in sheer causal interaction” but these interactions, like “human praxis or theory” always “fail to exhaust the reality” of any given material object (Harman 2012, 187). In some ways, the kind of resistance Harman theorizes may seem inapplicable in a material translation studies. After all, if we stop thinking with Littau about the relations between material objects and translation and start thinking about objects outside this (or any) relation, it would seem we’ve left translation behind favor of the material objects themselves.

But, by introducing material language to the matter of translation studies, it is possible to theorize resistance just as we theorize relation, because it is precisely in the relations translation makes possible that the matter of language shows itself to be resistant. For Harman, “the reality of hammer-being”<sup>2</sup> is “inscrutable”, always “lying behind the accessible, theoretical, practical, or perceptual qualities of the hammer” (2012, 187). For translators and translation theorists, the words “hammer” and “being” are themselves inscrutable, always at least partially resistant to their complete relatability in translation. Coming around again to translation studies’ potential for overlap with both cultural and material questions, this resistance can provide an opportunity for thinking cultural specificity as it adheres in and is held materially by language, both source and

receiving. I look forward to more work in this area, and to all the material futures of translation studies.

### **Note on contributor**

Rebecca Kosick is lecturer in translation studies in the School of Modern Languages at the University of Bristol. Her research focuses on the poetry and poetics of the Americas, with interests in image and text studies, experimental approaches to the practice and theory of translation, and materialisms old and new.

### **Notes**

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1. While my focus throughout this essay is stated as primarily having to do with “language”, my broad intent is to include all kinds of sign-systems, not just those that strictly take shape as language.

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